The Art of Receiving Graciously
Romans 11:33-12:2
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Elementary good manners in our culture dictate that gratitude be expressed in response to a gift. One of the very first social niceties we teach our children when they are barely able to talk is to say "thank you". The assumption is that if they are conditioned to say "thank you", the authentic feeling of gratitude will be added in the process. Saying "thank you" is important to us. Yet, sometimes - when we are given a particularly expensive gift, or a particularly unexpected gift, our carefully schooled responses beat a hasty exit and we say something like, "Oh, you shouldn't have - you really shouldn't have done that - that wasn't necessary".

We've all been guilty of that momentary lapse in graciousness: in fact some of us do it rather habitually. You know people, and so do I, to whom it is virtually impossible to pay a compliment. I've caught myself doing it and I'm in the process of concluding that "you shouldn't have - that wasn't necessary", just may be among the most inappropriate, graceless things we ever say to one another. Who, after all wants to be told that he shouldn't have done something which expresses how he feels? And, after all, if a gift were necessary it really wouldn't be a gift at all. I am also in the process of concluding that what appears, at first, to be a relatively minor social faux pas just may be indicative of a major theologiacal problem. And the fact that we have difficulty accepting unexpected and costly gifts from one another may say something about our ability, or our willingness, to be recipients of that greatest gift of all; the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Let's explore, for a minute, the reasons why we have trouble receiving graciously. What compels us to respond to the giver of a gift with the presumptuous suggestion that we know better than he or she what he or she should have done: and that what was done was quite unnecessary? There are four possible reasons, I think.

Beginning with the least likely and proceeding in the direction of the one I consider most probable the first reason may be that we simply don't like gifts. But the fact is, we do. We like surprises and presents. Part of the universal appeal of Christmas is in receiving unexpected gifts and giving surprises. In fact, there is something innately in every person that watches daily for something new and fresh and unexpected to happen. One of my very favorite observations was made by Sam Keen in his book, Apology for Wonder. I have shared it with you in another context but it is wonderfully applicable here as well. He wrote, "Unless we are exceptionally gifted with a strong propensity to wonder life easily becomes stale and boring. Thus we long for a surprise that will bring refreshment and novelty. A touch of this love of the surprising is probably seen in the expectation with which most of us wait for the morning mail. Who knows what will come?" (Apology for Wonder, p. 28-29). We do like gifts. We do like surprises.

The second possibility is that we respond to the giver of a gift with "you shouldn't have" because deep inside we feel that receiving the gift places us in debt to the giver, and carries with it the obligation to reciprocate. Our actual behavior documents the possibility of this one. If you received an unexpected gift this year, the chances are very good that the giver will be on your list next Christmas because a pattern of reciprocity has been established and no one wants to be indebted to anyone else.

Paul Tournier, Swiss psychiatrist and theologian, in his book, Guilt and Grace has an excellent chapter entitled "Everything must be paid for". Tournier wonders why so few Christians appear to be "free, confident and joyous souls" after twenty centuries of the Church proclaiming the gift of salvation. The Doctor concludes that the reason is "a deep psychological attitude, the idea deeply engraved in the heart of man, that everything must be paid for." (Guilt and Grace, p.174).

As theologian Tournier observes the presence of this motif in all religion. Hindus throw themselves into the waters of the Ganges to be washed of their guilt. Buddhists lavish costly offerings on statues of Buddha. All religions include pilgimages, sacrifices and various disciplines - the purpose of which is to enable the believer to pay for whatever the deity has given.

As psychiatrist, Tournier deals with the great difficulty many people have in accepting the fact that they are acceptable to other people: in the jargon of Transactional Analysis, that they are "OK". He cites an instance in which to a distressed, guilt ridden man he spoke about that ultimate grace that is accepting, forgiving and loving and the man replied, "But that's too easy."

As physician, Tournier believes that many illnesses, physical and emotional, even accidents, are the result of the person's attempt to expiate a sense of guilt or indebtedness. He writes, "It is a form of punishment which the sufferer administers to himself, and it goes on repeating itself indefinitely with a kind of inexorable fatality." (Ibid, p.175).

We do like to receive gifts, but we know that the act of receiving puts us in debt to another, if not literally, then emotionally, and we deal with it by saying, "You shouldn't have - or - that wasn't necessary."

The reverse of that particular syndrome is equally important and even more overt. If receiving a gift places us in debt to the giver, then giving a gift makes us the beneficiary of the indebtedness of the recipient. As usual, Madison Avenue is a little more sophisticated than the rest of us: Ad people know the power of this syndrome and encourage us to buy and give in order to put others in our debt. It's never said that clearly, of course. But think about those ads which encourage you to give a gift because of what the particular gift will say about you - the giver. The subtle idea is that a gift ought to reveal your affluence, generosity, sophistication, erudition and impeccable taste, with the result that the poor recipient will be overwhelmed and forever in your debt. Under those conditions it is most difficult to be gracious and, in fact, "you shouldn't have done it" is probably the only honest thing to say. It may be more blessed to give than to receive, as the Bible suggests, but it's easier to feel smug than grateful.

In the third place, "You shouldn't have" may be an accurate description of the way we feel about ourselves. We may respond that way because we feel truly undeserving of the gift we have been given. It is a universal experience: we've been rude or unkind to someone, and then that person has given us something, or been particularly thoughtful - and we didn't deserve it. A friend and colleague of mine attended a national conference on Evangelism several years ago and found himself seated beside a young couple who irritated him rather substantially with their hair, mode of dress, mannerisms and vocabulary. In the course of the several-day meeting he communicated his dislike to them in every possible way short of telling them. On the final day of the Conference a Communion service was celebrated and the worshippers were invited to give verbal gifts to one another. The young girl turned to my

friend and said, "We know that you don't like us, but we want you to know that we love you and wish to give you the gift of peace." He didn't deserve that and he knew it, and it was a deeply moving experience for him - so much so that months later he was still talking about it and wearing "Smile, God Loves You" buttons to Rotary.

Sometimes we don't deserve the gift. But sometimes our feelings of unworthiness are symptoms of a deeper crisis - a terrible poverty of spirit, a painful lack of self-esteem. Sometimes our opinion of ourselves is so low that we really mean it when we say, "You shouldn't have done that."

— Don't need gift - (4)

5 The final reason we have trouble receiving graciously is that the giver always comes to us in a gift. In receiving a gift one must deal not simply with the object itself, but affection, caring, love - with the other person, that is to say. We would prefer of course, to stay at arm's length. We don't want to be too close, too intimate, too involved. And the receiving of a gift makes that difficult to avoid. So we say, "You shouldn't have" and what we mean is, "You shouldn't have come this close: you shouldn't be making me open myself to you: we're friends, of course, but let's not get too close."

We don't intend it but there is a sense in which we teach this to our children. They spend countless hours prior to Christmas making gifts; items of somewhat limited utility and tarnished beauty, to be sure, but nevertheless items in which they have a considerable investment of time, skill, creativity and self. Those gifts - popsicle stick hot plates, pot holders, pencil boxes - mean a great deal to them because the giver is very much in the gift - the glue, ribbon and construction paper. And sometimes we let them know that we really don't appreciate what they've done, which they interpret to mean that we don't appreciate them. Sometimes they sense that we value store gifts more than their creations. Yet, in reality, there is so much more love and meaning in their humble artifacts than in the items they were taken to the store, given money and told to buy. We are not always prepared - or willing - to deal with the giver, the person - even when it is our own child.

"You shouldn't have done that," we say, perhaps because we don't want to feel indebted, or because we don't feel deserving, or perhaps because we don't want to deal with the person who comes to us in the gift. Each of those reasons, it seems to me, translates into our practice of Christian Faith and our response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is the very Good News that we have been given a gift, a most extravagant gift, a gift we do not deserve - namely, the love of God. We call that undeserved and extravagant love, grace. It is expressed perhaps most unmistakably in the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas is intended as a corporate "thank you" to God for His gift: not "you shouldn't have done that". Yet it is precisely here, where the faith is at its simplest - a gift given and our grateful response - that many of us have trouble. Like the man who told the psychiatrist, "that's too easy", we feel that there has to be a catch to the Good News; some conditions attached to God's love. Tournier observes that "The very people who long most ardently for grace have the greatest difficulty accepting it. It would be too simple a solution and a kind of intuition opposed it." (Ibid, p.174).

The late Karl Barth, the most influential theologian of this century, used to lead worship and preach to the prisoners each Sunday at the Basel jail. Because

of the nature of his congregation many of his sermons were about grace - God's acceptance of us apart from our merit. In one of those sermons he made a remarkable and brilliant and, I think, very important observation. He said, "Is it not a pity that we rebel against this very truth in the depth of our hearts? Indeed, we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace, and by grace alone. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from His goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." (Good News to the Captives, p.40). Salvation, Barth taught, was a gift we must learn to receive over and over again, "with hands outstretched".

The New Testament lesson for the first Sunday of Christmastide is from Paul's Letter to the Romans. For the first eleven chapters Paul struggles with some of the most difficult questions of Christian theology: justification by faith, election, the function of the law, the role of Israel as God's chosen nation. Throughout Paul keeps returning to the Grace of God - God's unmerited love for all men in Jesus Christ - as the essence of the Gospel. And then, right in the middle, at the end of Chapter 11, the apostle virtually erupts in a doxology to this God whose love he knows but whose ways he cannot understand.

> "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments! and how inscrutable His ways!" "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" Paul asked, "or who has given a gift to Him that He might be reapid?"

No one obviously. God is the giver: we are the humble recipients of the gift given. In Barth's unforgettable metaphor,"Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child." (Ibid. p.39).

The very essence of Christianity is a gift, an extravagant and, indeed, unnecessary gift. Dr. Tournier is right, of course: everything does have to be paid for. The Good News is that God has done the paying: there is no debt. That's the Gospel, and the essence of being a Christian is in the art of receiving graciously.

Christmas, slightly faded this morning certainly, but not yet gone, is ultimately just that: a ritualized "thank you" to God for the Gift of His Son.

George MacDonald, a Scot, put it this way:

> "For the real good of every gift it is essential, first, that the giver be in the gift - as God always is, for He is love,
> and next, that the receiver know and receive the giver in the gift."

The giver in the gift: that is what is offered whenever we give gifts to each other: not things but persons: not inanimate objects but, living relationships with others. And that is what is offered at Christmas. God has given a gift - "Unto us a child is born: unto us a Son is given, and His name shall be called Emmanuel. God with us." In Jesus Christ God gave Himself and offered a relationship which people, for two thousand years, have been calling salvation. It is a gift. It is free. It is for everyone - everyone, that is, who knows how to receive. Amen.

Father, we have been given much. Open us to one another as we receive and give the gifts of the season. Through it all make us newly aware of the extravagance and goodness of Your gift. Enable us, again to receive Your love - gladly, gratefully, joyfully, with hands outstretched. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.